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ABSTRACT

The Comprehensive Early Childhood Education Network is designed to encourage increased community support and influence in schools by providing information about existing early childhood programs to community members and school staffs. Information dissemination, observation of ongoing programs, and project monitoring are planned and supervised by individual District Advisory Councils. Evaluation of district objectives, evaluator's observations, interviews, and monitoring reports show that most information is disseminated, community training in planning and observation is needed, there are parent turnover problems, plans are followed, and increased parental involvement exists. (Author)

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# AN EVALUATION

# OF THE

# COMPREHENSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION NETWORK

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A paper presented to the American Educational Research Association

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# ABSTRACT OF THE 1971-72 EVALUATION OF THE COMPREHENSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION NETWORK

The Comprehensive Early Childhood Education Network (CECEN) is funded by Title III of E.S.E.A. to provide information about existing programatic approaches to early childhood education (ece) in Philadelphia and to provide opportunities for development of alternative approaches to staff, parental and community participation in ece in the city. As a result of the program, staff, parent and community members should be able to:

1) identify instructional alternatives in ece,

2) relate these options to the needs of their schools and communities,

3) choose from the alternatives based on their relationship to those needs,

4) increase parent and community participation in schools and classrooms, and

5) design effective approaches to parent and community support and influence on ece programs.

These goals are to be attempted at the level of the individual district. The program base in each of the eight public districts and the parochial system (which was allocated 25% of the funds and was effectively a ninth district) is a District Advisory Council (DAC) composed of at least 75% parents and community members plus principal and teacher representatives. Special Education representatives must include a parent and a professional. The DAC is responsible, in conjunction with the District Superintendent (DS), for overseeing the interconnected components of the project:

1) a district level information dissemination system,

2) a district-based training program for parents and professionals from selected "target schools", and

3) a locally designed monitoring process which evaluates the effectiveness of the other two components.

A Network Resource Teacher (NRT) serves as staff to help the DAC carry out these components. Each of four NRT's serves two districts. The Program Director acts as NRT for the Parochial Schools. Other program staff include a Program Information and Media Specialist (PIMS), a writer, two secretaries and an evaluator.

A Citywide Early Childhood Advisory Council (CECAC) oversees the whole program. DAC chairwomen serve on it along with representatives of civic groups and school district offices.

The model for the program was:

1) Information on alternative approaches to ece operating in Philadelphia would be provided to target school parents and professionals (e.g. in catalogues).

2) They would choose approaches which they would consider adopting in their school.

3) They would visit institutions using these approaches.

4) On the basis of the visits and consequent discussion plus, perhaps, further in-depth training or workshops, aspects of the approaches or institutions observed would be chosen for adaptation in the school.

5) These aspects would be implemented in the school.

Due to an administrative mandate prohibiting hiring during Summer, 1971, the program had a late start. For this reason the DS's made some decisions with little or no consultation with their DAC's; especially selection of target schools for the training component and selection of a site for the District Information Center (for dissemination materials).

Dissemination

Two television announcements, seven presentations to civic groups, and many news articles met the objectives pertaining to these media (no radio announcements fell short of that objective).

Catalogues describing the early childhood (birth through grade four) programs of all public schools in the city were written and distributed to each school and to various civic groups). They were much later than originally scheduled because the program began late and the job was much larger than was originally anticipated. The catalogue describing programs in the parochial schools was delayed due to misunderstood communications between the Archdiocesan office and some of the parochial schools. Dissemination of information about private institutions was dropped when the size of the task for public and parochial schools become apparent. A newsletter about the program and about other early childhood programs rounded out the central dissemination efforts.

District Dissemination Plans (DDP's) were designed by each DAC. These generally were prepared about a month behind schedule. Because they were the first attempts at district-wide dissemination, they often were unrealistically comprehensive. Nevertheless, articles in local newspapers, reports to district, Home and School, and civic meetings, district conferences, posters, flyers, district newsletters, and even "Curiosi-Tea Parties", were used to get out information. Each district used some of these and managed some dissemination. This was, however, the weakest part of the program partly because the job of preparing the catalogues (which the NRT's did in conjunction with the writer and the PIMS) was much more time-consuming than anticipated, and partly because training tended to overshadow this sort of dissemination.

Training

Funds for training were made available to each district. They were to go to the target schools for staff development in the broadest sense (including parents). The DAC's collected and approved plans from each target school and passed them on as a District Training Plan (DTP). These, too, were about a month

behind schedule due to the late start of the program. Like the DDP's, the DTP's contained behavioral objectives which were reviewed by the evaluator (excepting two DTP's which were submitted in final written form in April - too late for for revision to be worth the effort).

Training took one of two forms: visits to other educational institutions and workshops, lectures, or discussion groups led by specialists on particular topics. The training programs generally went as planned. There were a few cases in which no report or an incomplete one was turned in. In these instances, DAC minutes and reports were used to get an idea of the schools's program. While there were several reports from NRT's of schools in which the principal kept things under his control, in most schools parents were involved to a significant extent. Some inroads were made for parental involvement in schools in which little had occurred in the past. Most target schools increased the number of parent volunteers working in the school. All of the target schools included the parents at or above the minimal pay level for parents (40%). The poorest programs had little real parent involvement: just the minimum amount of money going to parents. Programs were said by the NRT's to be better when at least some joint parent-teacher sessions were included. Programs which allowed for discussion of visits, workshops, and the use to which what was learned might be put, were judged more successful than the few which did not allow for this. Parochial schools were particularly appreciative of the program. Parent involvement was more common, if less advanced, in the parochial target schools: fewer with minimal parent involvement, fewer with much parent input into decisions (i.e. more than just aides). Most of the target schools met their objectives either partly or totally.

Workshop topics included: child growth and development, reading, mathematics, learning at home, readiness for school, the parent role, speaking and reading Spanish and/or English (lessons for parents so they can help their children), how to test for handicaps, types of handicaps, where to get services for the handicaps, class organization, parental involvement (for teachers), discussion of observations, disruptive students, counselling for parents, making materials for home use or school use, use of open spaces, learning styles, Creative Dramatics, learning disabilities, speech improvement, physical therapy, and music for the retarded, discussion ("articulation") between Get Set, kindergarten, Year One and Year Two. In addition, several parochial schools made use of workshops offered by the public school's Office of Volunteer Services which trained parents in useful skills for volunteers.

While basically positive, there were some negative results of training due to a few cases of mismanagement (e.g. asking for additional funds and then failing to spend even the original allocation) and a few cases of unfortunate circumstances (e.g. five of seven teachers involved in training leaving by the end of the 1971-72 school year). Although in general the program did not seem to cause basic changes, there were cases where schools used the funds in conjunction with an agreement by parents to volunteer at least one (or more) hours for every hour of payment to install a model of operation in one or more grades of the school.

Monitoring

While some districts worked hard on their monitoring reports, others simply accepted their chairwoman's ideas. In general, the reports were not well prepared. This probably was due to poor understanding and preparation for doing this job. The evaluator was overly careful about contaminating the DAC's reports and so did not provide sufficient guidance to the DAC's for their monitoring efforts.

In general, the Monitoring Reports indicated that some information had been disseminated in the districts and particularly to the DAC's (one DAC disagreed with this). Most also felt that more could be done, especially getting the catalogues to the schools and making greater use of the District Information Centers (only one DAC said that much use was made of theirs). Training was said to have gone well and most reports spoke of improved communications and greater parental involvement. Most of the reports also indicated some changes beyond greater parental involvement in at least some of the target schools.

General Comments

NRT Interviews

Three NRT's found getting parents involved to be more difficult than they had expected. All four reported receiving good support, particularly from the Program Director. One NRT expressed surprise that principals who had resented being put into the program in 1971-72 pushed to get in for 1972-73. Another said she learned to take the blame for things which were not her fault and to get things in writing. Still another said she learned not to be too assertive but had difficulty knowing what to offer people. She found that there were limits to the amount of initiative she could exercise, while the other NRT's found that they had considerable room to exercise their initiative.

The NRT's described their roles as including; writer, secretary, conference organizer, procurer of resource people, program planner, staff development leader, facilitator-liaison, budgeter, and critic. Two found the role of NRT not to have been clearly defined at the start of the program.

The NRT's generally felt that dissemination had gone less well than it could have if (1) the program had not started late and (2) those involved had had a better understanding of what was entailed so their planning could have been more realistic, particularly with respect to time allotted for the work.

The NRT's thought that training had generally gone well. The DAC's had needed more expertise in evaluating plans, programs, and budgets and had gotten it in 1971-72, so their operations should be smoother in 1972-73 if there is continuity of membership. The NRT's generally felt that the DAC's still needed a clearer understanding of their monitoring responsibilities.

## Interview with Executive Director of Early Childhood Programs

The Executive Director of Early Childhood Programs expressed surprise at the strong role the DAC's played, the widespread interest in and knowledge of the program by parochial school parents and professionals, and the great variety of dissemination procedures and training programs used. He viewed each of these as strengths of the program. He was impressed with the knowledge displayed in three DAC meetings he attended and with the freedom with which parent DAC members asked questions. He also expressed satisfaction with the evaluator's ability to be both participant and evaluator - switching roles but keeping it clear which role he was playing when. He stated that a major strength of the program was its leadership.

The Executive Director said that the program had remarkably high visibility for a relatively low budget. He reported that it has a high reputation with top administration, including the Superintendent of Schools. He was pleased that the program sometimes served as a third force to help solve problems which it was not set up to solve, as well as making progress on those which it was designed to help solve (such as linkage between other programs). He pointed out that CECEN is a process and, as such, quite different from other programs. Finally, he expressed the hope that CECEN would become and/or help develop a self-sustaining process: part of the movement to meet the various needs of young children (and their families) across the city.

## Overall Program Objectives

While eighteen of the twenty-one responding public target school principals reported increased parental visits to their schools in the second half of 1971-72 compared to the first half, only seven reported making statements that parents were to be included in all major decisions about early childhood education in the school. Six reported actually doing this, one said that he had not.

In general, parents surveyed in the target schools reported that: they felt more welcome in the schools, they had had satisfactory talks with both the school principal and teachers during the year, that they felt that the teachers and the principal were willing to listen to them (but could not name examples of their suggestions which had been implemented). By the end of the 1971-72 school year, parents were more active in their schools. This was generally a matter of providing service (e.g. tutoring) to the school and usually did not involve decision making, although input about the training program was commonly allowed.

In general, teachers surveyed in the target schools reported that: the program had increased parental awareness of what they and the school were trying to do, parents who volunteered did so as aides and tutors and that would also be what they would do in 1972-73, parents had the knowledge and ability to positively affect early childhood education in the school if they had continued training and/or teacher supervision; and the program had provided the teachers with information about child development, alternative approaches, and materials.

The parochial school's reports and an interview with that system's liaison to the program indicated great satisfaction with the program on their part. The program provided resources for parochial schools in a manner which was both constitutional and influential.

Discussion

The evaluator, who helped write the program proposal, was in daily contact with the Program Director, constantly discussing and feeding back information about the program's operation. He sometimes took the Program Director's place in meetings, serving as a resource person at them, but he did not make decisions for the Program Director.

Feedback from evaluation led to several changes in the program:

1. A small amount of money could be spent on supplies for target schools in 1972-73.

2. Money could be spent for district-wide programs (e.g. conferences).

3. Money was mandated for training parents of pre-kindergarten children.

4. Simplified payroll procedures were instituted.

5. Parents could be paid for "on-the-job" training only if a professional was on-site supervising them full time.

6. A limit of four target schools per district plus whatever arrangement made best use of the 20% of the district funds allocated for special education.

While some target school principals were upset at the outset of the program because their schools were put in the program without their prior consent, most of them expressed satisfaction with the program at the end of the year.

It was decided by CECAC to keep the same target schools for 1972-73, as a rule, because the program began late, the model was applied inside-out (training commonly preceded or was concurrent with dissemination) and, usually, more than one time through the model was necessary, or more time was needed in follow-up staff-parent development (e.g. workshops in-depth about techniques employed at sites visited). Application of this revised, iterative or expanded model has as new hazards the possibility of parent turnover through transiency, waning interest and their children's graduation.

There were more training workshops (and fewer visits) held than originally anticipated. This was good in schools which could skip the visiting (shopping for a model) stage because a direction had already been established at the school and it was bad in schools which used workshops as the easy way to avoid doing much and to maintain the status quo.

One difficulty with visits was that in some instances parents and professionals allowed aspects of the school visited which they considered to be negative to block their vision of other aspects of the school.

There were some promising beginnings of model selection, development and implementation by target schools. These included adaptations of well-established models (e.g. the Bank Street, Behavioral Analysis and EDC models of Head Start Follow Through) and the creation of new models. One of the latter involved diagnostic testing, the cataloguing of available instructional materials by diagnostic need as a reference for teachers and aides, the provision of staff development in the use of the materials to remedy weakness revealed by the battery, and the training of parents and community people to work as volunteer aides in the program.

DAC meetings often suffered from the dual problems of parent reticence and professional over-talking. The latter was sometimes complicated by use of jargon and inclusion of technical items (e.g. budgets). Sometimes the parent membership was as confident as described by the Executive Director of Early Childhood programs, but sometimes DAC members were confused and uncertain. Parents were expected to take a heavy share of the responsibility for running the program without necessarily having preparation for doing so. To a considerable degree, this situation improved by the end of the year, at which time parents were more experienced, self-assured, and informed.

All in all, the program went well for one off to a late start and in its first year. Two major reasons for this seem to have been (1) it was an idea whose time had come and (2) the program staff were generally well suited to their jobs, particularly the Program Director who provided expertise gathered from work as a principal in the system and leadership with authority but not authoritarianism.

Some questions remain:

- How much continuity will there be among teachers and, especially, parents in the target schools? What impact will this have?

- What will happen when parents begin to ask for more influence in the schools?

- The program is set up as decentralized and as having minimal guidelines. Some people have found ingenious ways to subvert the spirit of the use to which CECEN funds may be put. Will a technical snarl of guidelines and rules have to result?

- CECEN can only provide a beginning of a process. Teachers must pick it up and include parents in a non-exploitative fashion. This is hard, time-consuming, threatening, and risky as well as potentially potent and highly valuable. Will it occur?